

Difference in the levels of Empathy and Psychological Well-Being between Psychology and Non-Psychology Postgraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the difference in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology students pursuing their postgraduation to assess the impact of academic specialization on the above-mentioned traits. The sample comprised psychology students from different universities in India (N=50) as well as students pursuing non-psychology fields enrolled in different universities/colleges in India (N=50). Empathy was measured using the Empathy Assessment Scale (Malakcioğlu, C., 2022) and Psychological Well-Being was measured using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale- Short Form (Ryff et al., 2007; adapted from Ryff, 1989). The findings rejected the hypotheses that psychology students will have higher levels of empathy and psychological well-being than non-psychology students. Regardless of the academic specializations, the levels of empathy as well as psychological well-being are the same and show no significant difference. These results cast doubt on widely held beliefs on how academic discipline affects psychological health and empathy. The study emphasizes how crucial it is to take into account contextual impacts, cultural variances, and individual differences to fully comprehend these phenomena. It also emphasizes the necessity of customized support networks and interventions considering the requirements of postgraduate students in all academic fields.

Keywords: Empathy, Psychological Well-Being, Psychology, Non-psychology, Postgraduates

INTRODUCTION

The word "student" describes those who are officially enrolled and acknowledged as learners at schools, colleges, and universities to acquire skills and knowledge that will help them advance personally and get ready for the world and enter the workforce. As of 2023, there were a total of 40.15 million students enrolled in higher educational institutes in India (All India Higher Education Survey, 2023).

A postgraduate degree is a type of qualification that is completed after an undergraduate degree. A variety of credentials fall under the category of postgraduate degrees, such as master's degrees, PhDs, and postgraduate diplomas and certificates.

The ability to pursue further education in a specialized field is a commonality among all postgraduate degrees, most of which require an undergraduate degree to be eligible for admission. There are several reasons why people pursue postgraduate degrees, including specializing in a particular

field of work or entering the academic and research worlds. Some decide to finish their postgraduate degree to completely alter their course of study or job.

American Psychological Association (APA) defines psychology as the study of behaviour and the mind. In the past, psychology was a branch of philosophy and emerged there. Today, psychology is a broad scientific field that includes several applied psychology subfields and major research areas, including clinical, industrial/organizational, school, and educational, human factors, health, neuropsychology, and cross-cultural psychology. Major research branches include experimental, biological, cognitive, lifespan developmental, personality, and social psychology.

Concerning the above definition, non-psychology fields can be defined as fields or subjects not pertaining to, affecting, or being concerned with psychology or the mind. This will include all fields that are not psychology, for instance, engineering, management, pharmacology, and finance, to name a few.

Empathy

Empathy is defined as gaining a piece of knowledge about another person through their perspective instead of one's own or living through their emotions, ideas, and perceptions (Edward Titchener, 1909). While empathy can develop into sympathy or personal anguish, which can lead to action, empathy does not in and of itself imply the desire to help. In psychotherapy, comprehending a client's thoughts, feelings, motives, or behaviours can be attained through the therapist developing empathy for the client.

Psychological Well-Being

Succinctly, and simply defining psychological well-being is one of the main problems this field of study is confronting. Psychological well-being is a vast and complex concept encompassing a person's general experience of positive emotions, life satisfaction, and feelings of purpose. To better understand the elements that contribute to psychological well-being's growth and maintenance, psychology has been actively studying psychological well-being for decades (.M, Dhanabhakya & .M, Sarath. 2023).

Ryff (1989) determined that psychological well-being is characterized by six traits: positive relationships, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose of life, and personal growth. These qualities include an individual's feeling of self-determination, control over their environment, potential for personal development, and capacity to build fulfilling relationships and gain a sense of purpose in life.

It is critical to determine whether the academic specialization of a person affects their feelings of empathy towards others and their psychological well-being and if there are any differences in these levels as the field of specialization changes. But, in India, there has been very little research in this area. To close this disparity, 100 postgraduate students pursuing their masters in India, were surveyed. The primary research question of the study is whether different areas of academic specialization affect the levels of empathy and psychological well-being of a person or, contrary to popular belief, the field of academic specialization does not matter.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Dimitrijević et. al. (2011) Psychological characteristics of future helping professionals: Empathy and attachment of psychology students

This research from Serbia examines the personality qualities of psychology students and students from non-helping professions, focusing on empathy and attachment quality. The study found that future caregivers are typically emotionally stable, empathic, capable of mentalization, and positive role models. Regardless of gender, these traits differentiate them from non-helpers. Although females outnumber

males, the gender distribution does not entirely explain the disparities, as helpers perform better than non-helpers.

Rasoal, C., Danielsson, H., & Jungert, T. (2012) Empathy among students in engineering programmes
Engineers often struggle with social competency and empathy, as they oversee project teams and serve as organizational leaders. A study at Linköping University, Sweden found that engineering students showed lesser empathy than psychology and social work majors. The findings suggest that engineering students need theoretical and applied empathy knowledge to grow their capacity effectively.

Costa, H. et. al. (2013) Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy: Effects on Psychological Well-Being in College Students

Using the Trait Meta-Mood Scale, the study examined the relationship between life happiness, mental health, and perceived emotional intelligence (EI). Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to evaluate the data from a sample of 1078 undergraduate students who were Spanish, Mexican, Portuguese, and Brazilian. Results showed that EI dimensions, particularly Clarity and Repair, significantly influence psychological well-being, suggesting that EI components contribute to well-being criteria independently of self-efficacy, thereby supporting the validity of perceived EI.

Putrino, N. et. al. (2018) Are there differences in health professionals' empathy due to academic and clinical experience?

The study from Buenos Aires evaluated empathy levels among medical and psychology students and compared them to those of trained professionals. Results showed medical students had poorer perspective-taking skills and higher personal anguish. Clinical expertise did not negatively impact empathy, but practitioners with heavier workloads had lower levels. The study suggests that empathy needs to be encouraged to maintain emotional comfort without causing significant distress.

Litten, V. et. al. (2020) Empathy and psychopathic traits as predictors of selection into business or psychology disciplines

The Australian study analyzed the influence of pre-existing empathy and psychopathic personality traits on the selection of psychology and business majors among first-year undergraduate students. Results showed that cognitive empathy, gender, and social desirability scores significantly predicted student discipline. Females with higher empathy and lower social desirability scores were more likely to be chosen for a psychology degree, with effect sizes ranging from small to moderate.

Chiracu, A., & Dumitru, A. D. I. (2021) Burnout, empathy and well-being in medical and psychology students

This Romanian study analyzed the factors affecting medical and psychology students' burnout, empathy, and well-being. 270 students aged 18-48 participated, with 94 men and 176 females. Burnout was measured using the Academic Burnout Scale, while empathy was measured using the Jefferson Scale of Empathy. Results showed medical students had lower well-being and empathy levels and higher burnout than psychology students. Empathy moderated the association between burnout and well-being.

Existing literature is vital for understanding the worldview of the relationship between academic specialization and different psychological factors. In this study, the focus is specifically on differences in empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology students. After reviewing the existing literature, it was found that there is almost no research done in this area in India, and whatever little research has been done, the components of positive psychology are missing from them. Most of them focus on variables, such as stress, anxiety, and burnout, to name a few.

METHODS

Purpose

This paper aims at studying the difference in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between students pursuing their postgraduation in psychology and students pursuing their postgraduation in non-psychology fields.

Objective

To assess the difference in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology postgraduate students.

Hypothesis

H₁- Psychology postgraduates will have a higher level of empathy than non-psychology postgraduates.

H₂- Psychology postgraduates will have a higher level of psychological well-being than non-psychology postgraduates.

Participants and sampling

The study used the convenience sampling technique as a method of data collection. The sample includes 100 people from India who are either currently enrolled in a postgraduation program or have completed their postgraduation in 2023. The total sample consists of 50 postgraduates from the field of psychology and 50 postgraduates from non-psychology fields. Data was collected using both online (Google Forms) and offline (Physical Questionnaires) mediums.

Variables

Two variables are studied in this paper

1. **Empathy:** The term "empathy," which was originally used in 1909 by psychologist Edward B. Titchener, describes the capacity to feel as others do, see things from their perspective, and put oneself in their shoes. Numerous studies demonstrate that empathy leads to acts of compassion. It is now a foundational idea in positive psychology and is being researched in many fields.
2. **Psychological Well-Being:** A condition of ideal mental health that includes emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions is known as psychological well-being. It entails resilience, autonomy, self-acceptance, meaningful and purposeful connections, pleasant emotions, and personal progress. A person who is in good psychological health feels fulfilled and satisfied and can effectively control their negative emotions. It is a state of flourishing in all facets of life, not only the absence of mental illness.

Tools

1. **Empathy Assessment Scale (EAS):** Cem Malakcioglu developed the empathy assessment scale in 2022, with 13 items spread throughout its three dimensions. There are five response categories in the inventory: never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always. Each item with the label "Never" receives a score of (1), items with the label "Seldom" receive a score of (2), items with the label "Sometimes" receive a score of (3), the item is categorized as "often" receiving a score of (4) and always receiving a score of (5). A high score on the scale would suggest high levels of empathy, whereas a low level would suggest low levels of empathy. The scale's concurrent validity is validated by the Pearson correlation ($r=0.467$, $p<0.001$) and it has a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.69-0.96).
2. **Ryff's Psychological Well-Being- Short Form:** Ryff et. al. developed the short form of the psychological well-being scale in 2007, which has 18 items spread throughout its six dimensions. It is adapted from Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale which was developed in 1989. There are seven response categories in the inventory: strongly agree, somewhat agree, a little agree, neither agree nor

disagree, a little disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree. Each item with the label "strongly agree" receives a score of (1), items with the label "somewhat agree" receive a score of (2), items with the label "a little agree" receive a score of (3), the item is categorized as "neither agree nor disagree" receiving a score of (4), "a little disagree" receiving a score of (5), "somewhat disagree" with a score of (6), and "strongly disagree" with a score of (7). Higher scores mean higher levels of psychological well-being.

Procedure

The focus of the study was to investigate the difference between the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology postgraduates in India. 100 sets of data were collected for this research. Participants were fully informed about the research prior to data collection. All participants (N=100) gave their proper written consent after being assured that the information they provide will be kept confidential. Empathy Assessment Scale was used to assess their empathy and Ryff’s Psychological Wellbeing Scale- Short form was used to assess their psychological well-being.

Statistical Analysis

After successful data collection, scoring was done using the latest version of MS Excel (Microsoft 365). Using SPSS, the raw scores were subjected to independent sample t-test analysis to analyze the difference in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology students respectively.

RESULT ANALYSIS

Table 1: Independent Sample t-test of Psychology and Non-Psychology Students on Empathy and Psychological Well-Being

Variables	Psychology		Non-Psychology		T(98)	p	Cohen’s d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Empathy	48.92	6.84	48.44	6.13	.369	.713	0.073
PWB	91.60	12.66	91.84	12.18	.097	.923	0.019

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to find out the difference in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology postgraduates. There was no significant difference in the levels of empathy between psychology (M= 48.92, SD= 6.84) and non-psychology (M=48.44, SD= 6.13) postgraduates; t(98)= .369, p=.713.

Similarly, there was no significant difference in the levels of psychological well-being between psychology (M= 91.6, SD= 12.65) and non-psychology (M= 91.84, SD= 12.18) postgraduates; t(98)= 0.97, p=.923.

These results suggest that academic specialization does not affect the psychological facets of an individual. Specifically, the results suggest that there are no differences in the levels of empathy and psychological well-being between psychology and non-psychology postgraduates.

DISCUSSION

Overall research findings are contrastingly different from the bulk of the research present on similar topics. In the present study, a fascinating finding emerged from the comparison of psychological well-being and empathy levels between psychology and non-psychology postgraduate students: no significant difference was found. This means the hypotheses formulated are rejected in the Indian context. One possible explanation for this could be that the hypotheses were developed based on the bulk of the research

conducted; however, most of this research has been done in the Western context, with little to no work done in India or even South Asia in this area of study.

One possible explanation for the research findings is that behavioral science is now required to be taught for all courses at many Indian universities and colleges, regardless of the student's academic specialization. It teaches students about mental health, working in teams, emotional intelligence (EI), and maintaining peace and harmony, among other things. This serves as a revision of the values and knowledge that have already been ingrained in them and serves to further reinforce and perpetuate the lessons they have previously learned in life. It also teaches them new techniques to improve their well-being and other aspects of their mental and psychological health. This benefits people from all walks of life and aids in the subconscious development of empathy.

The lack of significant differences in psychological well-being and empathy between postgraduates in psychology and non-psychology encourages a more thorough examination of the determinants influencing these traits in the context of academia. The individual heterogeneity within each group could be one reason for these results. While individuals studying psychology may possess theoretical understanding and training in empathy and mental health, students studying disciplines other than psychology may learn comparable qualities via their own experiences, personal development, or coursework. This is further supported by the research conducted by Choi, D., et. al. in 2016, in which they concluded that perspective-taking, which is a cognitive aspect of empathy, is crucial for enhancing psychological well-being.

Empathy and psychological health are significantly shaped by cultural influences as well. Social conventions, familial relationships, and cultural beliefs might affect people's perceptions and expressions of empathy in the Indian context, as well as their general mental health. Indians, for generations, have believed in and perpetuated the idea of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (Maha Upanishad), which translates to 'the world is one family'. This concept helps in inculcating a sense of empathy and compassion in children in their formative years and also makes them mindful of the value of the people around them and their emotions and feelings. It also implies that empathy is a trait we inherit from our forefathers and develops throughout our lives.

This implies that larger socio-cultural effects need to be taken into account and that academic specialty alone may not be the only factor determining these characteristics. Maximiano-Barreto, M. A. et. al. also reported in their 2020 study that sociodemographic variables should be considered in future research assessing the population's empathy levels.

The findings also cast doubt on the idea that learning psychology leads to an improvement in psychological health and empathy, or makes individuals pursuing psychology better than individuals from non-psychology backgrounds and professions. It emphasizes the necessity for interdisciplinary approaches in mental health education and treatment and emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of how academic disciplines contribute to the development of these traits.

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Implications and Future Directions

The study's conclusions have applications for mental health practitioners and educational institutions. Rather than presuming that studying psychology naturally promotes psychological health and empathy,

mental health education should take a comprehensive approach. This could entail encouraging a culture of empathy and well-being in academic environments by incorporating empathy-building exercises and mental health awareness initiatives across disciplines.

Future studies should look into other factors like personality qualities, coping strategies, and social support networks that may affect postgraduates' psychological health and empathy. Studies with a longitudinal design may also monitor changes in these factors over time, offering insights into the dynamic nature of interpersonal skill development and mental health in academic settings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the finding calls into question preconceived notions regarding the possible influence of the academic field on certain facets of the human experience. Despite the temptation to draw broad conclusions from a single study, it's critical to acknowledge the complexity of psychological well-being and empathy. Individual variations, cultural upbringings, and life events are probably important influences on these characteristics, occasionally outweighing the impact of academic specialty.

This study emphasizes the need for more investigation into the complex interactions across academic fields, individual characteristics, and mental health implications. These kinds of studies can provide insightful information to the psychology community as well as to more general conversations about human behaviour and well-being. In the end, understanding these relationships can help therapies and support networks that work to advance psychological health and empathy among people from different educational backgrounds.

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